4 Tips for a Healthy and Stress-Free Lunchbox

tumped by what to pack in your child's lunchbox? Stop worrying and learn to love planning.

Whether your child is an athlete who needs extra calories for that after-school game or a teenager trying to maintain a healthy weight, here are four tips from the Food and Drug Administration for making a nutritious and personalized lunch.

Tip 1: Plan Your Meals

The key to filling a lunchbox with wholesome foods that are essential for healthy growth and weight maintenance is planning. That's the advice of Leila T. Beker of FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. She should know: she's a parent and grandparent with a Ph.D. in nutrition.

Start by planning your family's meals for the whole week, Beker advises busy caregivers. If that task is too daunting, start smaller by planning lunch for a day or two and progress from there. Duplicate that meal plan for the next week and build on it.

"You have to have a strategy for a healthy life, week by week. Think about what fruits, vegetables, lean protein and whole grains your family will eat so you can shop and



have wholesome foods on hand," Beker says.

Start with the basic four: fruits and vegetables, whole grains for fiber (even if that means cutting off the crust because kids prefer the soft part), dairy and protein. Get your kids involved in helping to pack their lunches and planning family meals. That helps them develop good habits that last a lifetime.

If you have a bagel for breakfast, have a salad for lunch to balance your nutritional needs, she says. If your approach to each day is to grab food on the go, that can become a problem. "If you don't plan, you become a victim of convenient foods," she adds.

Tip 2: Base Your Lunchbox on MyPlate

Need help planning meals? MyPlate Kids' Place (http://www.choosemyplate. gov/kids/) has recipes and mealplanning information geared to different age groups. It also has advice on making healthy meals, cooking at home and developing healthy eating habits.

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"Parents should understand that it's not what you say that matters, but what you do. Your kids are watching what you do. So if you don't eat healthy foods, they won't either," Beker says. "If you don't eat your vegetables and if you don't have a balanced diet, why would you expect your child to do any better?"

Then add some fun. Studies show that children will eat more fruits and vegetables if you make it interesting for them, says Shirley R. Blakely, a senior dietitian with FDA's Office of Nutrition, Labeling & Dietary Supplements. Give them fruits and vegetables they like; add some dressing for dipping.

Replace French fries with a baked potato jazzed up with cottage cheese and cherry tomatoes on top. Mix unusual foods together, such as apples and peanut butter dip. Cut fruits and vegetables into bite-size pieces and fun shapes.

The trick is to give your kids a variety of good foods that are good for them. An apple one day; a pear another; then an orange. Variety isn't just the spice of life; it's important for developing healthy habits.

Tip 3: Cut Portions

Kids need smaller portions. Think quarter-cups, tablespoons and halfsandwiches, depending on your child's size, age and activity level. For a toddler, think tablespoons—not cups.

Cut sandwiches in triangles, Beker says. That reduces the portion and increases the fun. What's a reasonable portion? Think finger foods that are easily grasped by little hands: cut-up carrots and apples.

"Don't expect your child to eat as much as you eat. If you do, they will get frustrated, and you'll get aggravated. They will also be eating too much and won't develop a healthy habit of eating to satiety. Instead, they will learn to eat by volume," Beker says.

Families should let children serve themselves at the table for better portion control, she adds.

Tip 4: Read the Label

Understanding the Nutrition Facts label (http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm20026097.htm) is a big step toward a healthier lunchbox. When stocking your pantry, narrow down your choices based on the label. Read the ingredients and check for sources of fats and sugars in the food, Beker says.

When shopping for food, pick one item at a time to read the Nutrition Facts label, she adds. That way you can focus your choices on foods that

provide healthier nutrient contributions to the daily intake. Next time you go shopping, check the labels of still other products.

Just because something is low fat doesn't mean it has fewer calories. Sometimes another food with a little more fat is a better overall choice because it's more balanced.

You don't need to add extra fat or sugar to make tasty and healthy meals for your kids, Beker says. But remember: You can't make them without planning.

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